

# Australian energy chief backs nuclear power

By Rich Bowden

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Dr Ziggy Switkowski, newly appointed head of the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organization (ANTSO), has criticized the government's efforts to appear "green" in an election year saying nuclear energy was "the only real alternative" to fossil fuel energy in Australia.

Speaking at a Committee for Economic Development of Australia lunch last week, Dr Switkowski said, "Australia is hostage to global warming, not to national warming," and that "arguably nothing Australia does at a local level will make any difference to our climate."

He called on the Australian Government to introduce carbon taxes -- charges paid by energy producers for carbon emissions -- saying once such a tax system was in place, nuclear power would then be competitive in comparison to Australia's coal industry and the only worthwhile energy option for Australia's future.

Dismissing alternative energy such as solar and wind as unreliable sources, he insisted nuclear energy would eventually be the major contributor to Australia's energy needs.

Arguing that climate change is a long-term matter, Switkowski said that it was far more important to "...set the direction right so that we arrive at the right spot in the middle of the century than to do a whole lot of things at the moment because it makes us somehow or other feel that we are making a contribution."

The science chief and ex-nuclear physicist was the person chosen by the Howard Government to head a review last year into the feasibility of nuclear power in Australia. The controversial review, which environmental groups claimed was deliberately stacked with pro-nuclear energy identities, found a nuclear power industry was viable in Australia within ten years -- a claim refuted by independent studies.

In the report, Dr Switkowski's taskforce found that 25 reactors could feasibly be built within 50 years providing over a third of Australia's energy. However green groups have opposed the report's breezy recommendations saying the siting of the reactors and the proposed disposal of the toxic nuclear waste posed insurmountable problems.

Addressing the problem of waste storage at the business lunch, Dr Switkowski conceded this was an "emotional" subject but said advances in technology would soon make long-term storage of the waste safe.

Also dismissing concerns over reactor safety he said, "Happily there is no history of accident and claims in this industry, aside from the two that are well known [Chernobyl

and Three Mile Island], but that doesn't mean there hasn't been a lot of work into formulating a framework to handle such an event," he said.

Switkowski's champion, Prime Minister Howard has been criticized for his apparent indifference to climate change with Australia, along with the United States, being the only western industrialized nation not to sign the Kyoto treaty, the agreement designed to set targets to reduce carbon emissions. Under his term of government, Howard has been hesitant to address climate change saying to do so would destroy Australia's powerful coal industry and with it, Australia's economy.

However with an important election looming later this year, Howard has turned from a "climate change skeptic" to a "climate change realist." With Australia enjoying one of the world's largest supplies of uranium, he has unhesitatingly flagged a nuclear future for the country saying carbon emissions from nuclear power would be greatly reduced compared to Australia's present reliance on coal-fired power stations.

He has also championed "clean coal" technology -- the reduction of carbon emissions from the heavy polluting coal stations as a future option for the coal industry.

Dr Switkowski though rejected the clean coal option at the business lunch saying that, though it was "filled with potential," the technology was decades away from being a feasible alternative.

In comparison he said nuclear power would take only 15 years before it became a reality though admitted that it would take a huge investment from the government and the establishing of a carbon tax scheme to make it financially viable.